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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003742

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2016

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SUBJECT: TFLE01: SYRIA DAILY SITREP 13 FOR MONDAY JULY 31,
2006

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for Reasons 1.4 b and
d

11. (S) Summary: For the second time in two days Israel bombed the main border crossing between Lebanon and Syria, more than three miles from the Syrian border. Syrian artillery, missile and ground forces are being defensively dispersed from their garrisons throughout Syria and Syrian air defenses are in a heightened state of defensive readiness. Limited pro-Hizballah demonstrations continue to occur daily in downtown Damascus. Local police have stepped up their efforts to protect the Embassy. The Embassy's Emergency Action Committee (EAC) has imposed a midnight - 5 a.m. curfew and a 50-mile travel limit on American personnel. On July 30, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad condemned Israel's attack on the Lebanese village of Qana as "state terrorism", while SARG Information Minister Mohsen Bilal insisted on an "unconditional" cease-fire prior to any negotiations on resolving the current crisis. A Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy is expected to travel to Lebanon on July 31 or August 11. End Summary.

Political/Military

12. (S) The following are political/military updates:

-- Embassy contacts and media reports have confirmed additional Israeli bombing of the border between Lebanon and Syria near the Masna-Jdeidah crossing on the night of July 130. The raid struck between the Lebanese and Syrian immigration offices, but on the Lebanese side, more than three miles from the Syrian border. The border crossing remained open Sunday, though passable only on foot.

-- DAO reports that Syrian artillery, missile and ground forces are being defensively dispersed from their garrisons throughout Syria, in what appears to be a defensive effort to enhance the survivability of Syrian forces against Israeli attack by relocating them away from known positions. Syrian air defenses are in a heightened state of defensive readiness.

-- Syrian president Bashar al-Asad decried Israel's attack on the Lebanese village of Qana as "state terrorism" in a telephone conversation with Lebanese president Emile Lahoud, according to official Syrian news agency, SANA. In his first public comments on the fighting since the crisis erupted July 12, Asad declared, "the Syrian people are ready to offer anything that might support, help and bolster Lebanon." Asad met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Abul Gheit in

Damascus on July 30 to discuss "contacts underway to reach a cease-fire in Lebanon." (AFP)

-- SARG Information Minister Mohsen Bilal was quoted on July 30 as saying that Syria would insist on an "unconditional" cease-fire before any negotiations could proceed on resolving the regional crisis. Bilal also denied Israel's claim that the Hizballah rocket that struck the Israeli town of Afula on July 29 was Syrian-made, according to media reports.

-- Police effectively quelled a demonstration by small groups of men waving Hizballah flags the evening of July 29 in downtown Damascus, Umawiyeen Square.

-- RSO reported two demonstrations on July 31 in support of the Lebanese and Palestinian people:

1) A vocal but benign group of 100-150, mostly children, gathered at the Red Cross headquarters near the Embassy and marched through downtown Damascus carrying Syrian, Palestinian and Hizballah flags. The crowd, followed by two TV cameras, dispersed peacefully after the demonstration. No extraordinary security was deployed around the Embassy, nor was any required.

2) A "calm" crowd, peaking at 1700 people, marched through downtown Damascus to the U.N. office carrying Syrian, Palestinian and Hizballah flags. The demonstrators dispersed by themselves and no extraordinary security was deployed around the Embassy.

-- Contacts have noted a lack of males between the age of 18-35 registered in Syrian centers taking in displaced Lebanese.

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Security

13. (C) The following are security updates:

-- RSO has received confirmation that Syrian police are working to protect the Embassy and other locations, with three groups of 150 riot police in Damascus put on heightened alert as a precautionary measure and additional plainclothes security officers positioned near the Embassy as well. As of July 31, the uniformed police posted around the Chancery's perimeter - withdrawn last month without notice - had returned.

-- To limit the exposure of Embassy personnel to the potential threat posed by rising anti-American sentiment among the local population, the Embassy's Emergency Action Committee (EAC) has imposed:

1) a midnight - 5 a.m. curfew for American personnel;

2) a 50-mile (from the Embassy) travel limit on personal and official travel. Travel beyond this radius requires approval by the Charge and RSO.

-- DAO reports that one of its vehicles was vandalized, i.e. "keyed", overnight. U.S. Embassy vehicles are recognizable by their diplomatic license plates.

Consular

14. (U) The following are consular updates:

-- The Consular section received 75 walk-in requests for ACS services on July 30, substantially down from 148 inquiries the previous day. Consular noted that an usually high number of these walk-ins posed visa-related questions.

Economic

15. (C) The following are economic updates:

-- A Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy carrying relief supplies traveled successfully to Lebanon on July 27. Another Red Crescent convoy is expected to travel to Lebanon on July 31 or August 1, according to the Red Crescent President Abdul Rahman Attar. Attar stressed that despite humanitarian contributions from several countries (not including the U.S., he noted), medicine is still desperately needed.

-- Embassy FSNs report that a variety of commodities (including fresh produce) from Lebanon have begun reappearing in Syrian markets at approximately three times their usual prices. (Comment: This may indicate the resumption, albeit with difficulty, of cross-border overland trade networks after a period in which Lebanese products, especially perishable items, did not reach Syrian markets.)

-- Syrian official press reports that since the beginning of the crisis 12 planes have arrived in Latakia, carrying 373 tons of goods destined for Lebanon, including food, blankets and medicine.

-- A mission from Mercy Malaysia, in Syria to assess the humanitarian situation, noted 25 refugee centers in and around Damascus.

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